

NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-6111
CLAUDIO ESKENAZI

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NICARAGUA

ANNCR:

LAST WEEK'S SUCCESSFUL GUERRILLA ATTACK AGAINST NICARAGUA'S NATIONAL LEGISLATURE AND THE LATEST ANTI-GOVERNMENT GENERAL STRIKE HAVE FOCUSED WORLDWIDE ATTENTION ON THE PLIGHT OF THAT CENTRAL AMERICAN NATION. VOA'S CLAUDIO ESKENAZI HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT.

NARR:

NICARAGUA EMERGED AS A SOVEREIGN NATION UNDER SERIOUS HANDICAPS. MOST OF ITS AREA IS COMPOSED OF LAKES, SWAMPS, MOUNTAINS AND JUNGLES, AND MOST OF ITS PEOPLE LIVE IN THE TROPICS. NICARAGUA'S MAJOR CITIES ARE LOCATED ON THE HUMID LAKE LOWLANDS WHICH UNTIL RECENT YEARS WERE RAVAGED BY YELLOW FEVER AND MALARIA.

DURING THE COLONIAL ERA, NICARAGUA ATTRACTED FEWER ENERGETIC SPANISH EXPLORERS THAN THE SETTLEMENTS ON THE PROSPEROUS HIGHLANDS OF NEIGHBORING GUATEMALA AND COSTA RICA. IN ADDITION NICARAGUA ALSO HAD THE MISFORTUNE OF BEING LOCATED ON ONE OF THE OBVIOUS SITES FOR A TRANSOCEANIC CANAL -- A GEOGRAPHIC ACCIDENT WHICH REPEATEDLY INVOLVED THAT NATION IN THE AMBITIONS OF GREATER POWERS. BUT NICARAGUA IS ALSO RICH IN LARGELY UNDEVELOPED NATURAL RESOURCES SUCH AS GOLD, TROPICAL WOODS AND FERTILE AGRICULTURAL LANDS. STILL ITS NATURAL HANDICAPS EXPLAIN IN PART THE TORTUOUS ROAD NICARAGUA HAS FOLLOWED SINCE ITS INDEPENDENCE FROM SPAIN MORE THAN ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS AGO.

NICARAGUA HAD BEEN RULED DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY BY THE SOMOZA FAMILY FOR THE LAST FORTY-FIVE YEARS. DURING THE LATE

FIFTIES AND EARLY SIXTIES, WHILE MOST OLD-STYLE LATIN AMERICAN MILITARY DICTATORS WERE EITHER DEPOSED OR ASSASSINATED, GENERAL ANASTASIO SOMOZA -- FATHER OF THE CURRENT PRESIDENT -- SUCCEEDED NOT ONLY IN HOLDING ON TO POWER BUT IN PASSING IT ON TO HIS SONS AS WELL.

FOR TWENTY-SOME YEARS BEFORE SOMOZA'S RISE, NICARAGUA WAS A SEMI-PROTECTORATE OF THE UNITED STATES. IN THE VIEW OF MANY NICARAGUAN CRITICS, THE AMERICAN INTERVENTION IN THEIR COUNTRY WAS SOLELY TO PROTECT U.S. INVESTMENTS IN MINES, LOANS, PLANTATIONS, BANKS AND RAILROADS. BUT APOLOGISTS FOR THE UNITED STATES AT THE TIME JUSTIFIED INTERVENTION ON HUMANE GROUNDS: THE PROTECTION OF LIFE AND LIBERTY AND THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE LOCAL POPULATION'S LIVING CONDITIONS AS WELL AS THEIR DEFENSE AGAINST INTERVENTION BY EUROPEAN CREDITORS.

WHATEVER THE REAL REASONS, SUPPORT FOR U.S. INTERVENTION AMONG NICARAGUANS WAS NOT UNANIMOUS. GENERAL AUGUSTO CESAR SANDINO, FOUNDER OF THE PRESENT-DAY SANDINISTA GUERRILLAS, REFUSED TO ACCEPT AN AMERICAN-SPONSORED ELECTION. SANDINO PURSUED HIS GUERRILLA TACTICS FOR SEVERAL YEARS UNTIL HE WAS TREACHEROUSLY SHOT BY THE NICARAGUAN NATIONAL GUARD AFTER LAYING DOWN HIS ARMS.

THE U.S. MARINES WITHDREW IN 1933 HOPING THAT NICARAGUA WOULD HENCEFORTH BE ABLE TO GOVERN ITSELF DEMOCRATICALLY. BUT HOPES FOR ORDERLY GOVERNMENT SOON YIELDED TO THE REALIZATION THAT ONE OF THE MOST TANGIBLE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE U.S.-INTERVENTION ERA WAS THE NICARAGUAN NATIONAL GUARD, TRAINED BY THE AMERICAN MARINES. SHORTLY THEREAFTER THE LEADER OF THE WELL-DISCIPLINED AND ARMED NATIONAL GUARD, GENERAL ANASTASIO SOMOZA, DEPOSED THE ELECTED PRESIDENT AND BECAME NICARAGUA'S SUPREME RULER.